



THE 9TH EDITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
EUROPEAN INTEGRATION
REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

The Approach of the Muslim “Other” in the Western Media

Alina Beatrice Cheșcă¹

Abstract: The images of the other can be found everywhere in the Western civilization and undoubtedly, they have become part of the discourse of colonization. It must be admitted that the encounters between the Western world and the Islam have produced a portrayal of the Islamic religion and Muslim culture mostly in negative, unfair and self-serving ways. Considering that the literature approaching these stereotypes is quite comprehensive, this paper analyses why the Western world has always shown negative images of the Islam and Muslims. The Western image-makers, such as the religious leaders, political institutions and mass-media render the portraits of Muslims in both funny and cruel ways. All these images of the Other seem to have served important goals throughout the history of Western civilization. Sometimes these goals are not very serious, while in other situations they can be terribly destructive. Unfortunately, for Muslims there are bad consequences coming from the social and political background. However, we must all agree that, beyond culture, religion, politics or race, beyond image, prejudices and stereotypes, there should be no boundaries between human beings, our souls and minds, as we are all equal, valuable and important for the whole mankind.

Keywords: media; Muslims; otherness; stereotypes, Western civilization

*Motto: “Come, come, whoever you are. Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.
It doesn't matter. Ours is not a caravan of despair.” (Rumi Mawlana)*

Perhaps any study on Image and Imagology should start with the following suggestive and very touching lines belonging to a mystic, philosopher and poet in the 13th century - Muhyi 'd-din Ibn 'Arabi: “My heart has opened unto every form: it is a pasture for gazelles, a cloister for Christian monks, a temple for idols, the Ka'ba of the pilgrim, the tables of the Torah and the book of Qur'an. I practice the religion of Love; in whatsoever directions its caravans advance, the religion of Love shall be my religion and my faith.” (Muhyi 'd-din Ibn 'Arabi)

The idea of writing such a paper struck me several years ago when I was in Izmir for a conference and, during a break, a Turkish professor from Ankara started telling us very amused that, some years before, someone had been very surprised that he was Turkish, making the following remarks: “How can you be a Turk? You are wearing a suit, not shalvars, you are not wearing a turban and you don't have a moustache!!” The Turkish professor exclaimed in astonishment, addressing us: “Can you imagine?? That person thought that Turks were still wearing the same clothing like 200 years ago!! You see, Turks and Arabs are still the victims of stereotypes and prejudices...” Considering the professor's experience, I decided to make research in order to analyze the complex topic of the Muslim “Other” in the Western mass-media.

¹ Senior Lecturer, PhD, “Danubius” University of Galati, Romania. Address: 3 Galati Blvd, Galati 800654, Romania, Tel.: +40372 361 102. Corresponding author: alina.chesca@univ-danubius.ro.

To start with some theoretical aspects, according to professor Eugenia Gavriľiu, “Imagology may be defined at its simplest as the study of the representations of the foreign other in a literary work, in a national literature, or in the mental structures prevailing in a cultural community at a given historical moment in its evolution.” (Gavriľiu, 2002: 5) It is known that literary imagery is interdisciplinary, focusing on literary and intellectual cross-fertilization, this field being very interesting to Cultural Anthropology, History, Literary Criticism and Comparative Literature. The psychology of the peoples/nations has become more and more important due to the increasing awareness of national identities as collective representations of self-images. Eugenia Gavriľiu considers that “it is not the degree of truth of the image of national identity, nor the objective information of such images that constitute the main concern of the imagologist but how these have become recognizable through literary representation.” (Gavriľiu, 2002: 6)

It is also important to mention the two basic concepts, i.e. “differentiation”, when “the Other” is regarded as *different* from the examining “I/we” and of “appropriation”, when “the Other” is assimilated by the “I/we”. In analyzing the concept of “otherness”, we must identify the relation between the narrating “I/we”, which represents the *base culture* and the examined “Other”, which is the *target culture*; we must find the dichotomic coordinates underlying the representations of the foreign environment: East versus West, North vs South, distant vs familiar, included vs excluded, high vs low; we must understand the space of the Other in terms of appropriation (the foreign place being incorporated into the base culture) or rejection, in this case the place of the Other having a negative role. Last but not least, the text must be read as an anthropological document of the foreign Other, describing religion, social aspects, manners, customs and habits.

It is a very well-known fact that, for a long time, Muslims and Islam have had a bad image in the Western mass-media, being the victims of misconceptions and generalizations, which is an unfair attitude towards hundreds of millions of people. A stereotype is the creation of a biased point of view, i.e. an individual will consider the behaviour of one or few persons and state that all people belonging to that particular group, be it a social, religious and ethnic one, behave in the same way. This is a very bad attitude, both for the base culture and for the target culture, as people will start behaving in a judgmental and biased way. Nowadays, Arabs are seen as terrorists and murderers because of the manner mass-media presents them and newspapers use key words such as extremists, terrorists and fanatics to describe them.

When stereotypical images become stronger, more and more misperceptions appear, inducing “pictures in our heads,” a sentence introduced by journalist Walter Lippmann about eighty-five years ago. And he also said: “We are told about the world before we see it. We can imagine most things before we experience them. And those perceptions govern deeply the process of perceptions.” Unfortunately, a certain spite and fear towards the Arab countries have become embedded in the American psyche. Arabs are collectively indicted because of the crimes or alleged crimes of some extremists.

The question is why Muslims are labeled nowadays. They are judged by their appearance and because of the bad deeds committed by very few citizens of the huge population of Muslims, because of all the misconceptions about Islam spread by mass-media and American movies. Muslims are generally ridiculed, stereotyped, misunderstood and offended by the media today; the Muslims in the movies are looked upon as terrorists, wife beaters or killers and oppressed women. Sometimes it may be true, but this is the case with all cultures, races and religions and it is about individuals, not about a general attitude. It is generally accepted that the main stereotype is that Muslims are regarded as terrorists and the crimes committed by few Muslims are attributed to the whole population. But this is not fair at all,

as those who choose this kind of life are definitely extremists. The Islam does not accept terrorism as an act of faith and everywhere I have traveled so far, people (i.e. Muslims) have been of the same opinion.

A telling example of how media presents facts and events in a prejudicial manner was the Oklahoma City bombing. In 1995, only several minutes after the event, news reporters insinuated that the bombing was done by terrorists. Being used to the stereotypes regarding Arabs, the American public immediately developed images of the terrorists. This point of view was fueled by the fact that it was a state building containing several government agencies. For example, an American expert in terrorism advised people not to believe Islamic groups when they denied involvement. Moreover, the CNN news channel gave the names of the Arab suspects being detained for questioning. Critics state that this type of reporting was an exception from the normal objective CNN usually takes into account, that of protecting the identity of individuals involved in criminal activities until the facts have been confirmed. Certainly, it was almost impossible for the Americans to understand the word “terrorist” with regard to citizens of their own country, as the word “terrorism” was (and is!) synonymous with Arabs. However, it would be interesting to find out whether a change in their mentality occurred, considering that an American citizen was arrested for the Oklahoma bombing.

In April 1986, the columnist Sydney Harris, in “The World Shrinks and Stereo-types Fall”, Detroit Free Press, made the following remarks: “The popular caricature of the average Arab is as mythical as the old portrait of the Jew: He is robed and turbaned, sinister and dangerous, engaged mainly in hijacking airlines and blowing up public buildings. It seems that the human race cannot discriminate between a tiny minority of persons who may be objectionable, and the ethnic strain from which they spring. If the Italians have their Mafia, all Italians are suspect; if the Jews have financiers, all Jews are part of an international conspiracy; if the Arabs have fanatics, all Arabs are violent. In the world today, more than ever, barriers of this kind must be broken, for we are all more alike than we are different.” (Sydney Harris, 1986, in Shaheen, 1997:11) Professor Jack Shaheen emphasized very well the negative power of generalizations, of stereotypes and prejudices. A whole nation or ethnicity should not pay the price for the mistakes made by several of its members.

Edward Said, in his pioneering work on Orientalism (1978), stated that these cultural and ideological environments were not a new phenomenon, considering that historically they had served the interests of colonial powers like Britain. Orientalists were instrumental in furthering the goals of the empire. It must be mentioned that the Western colonial powers administering the Muslim countries targeted many aspects of Muslims’ way of life. For example, in Algeria, the French forbade the use of Arabic as an official language of instruction and also tried to abolish the chador (scarf), as the French wanted to impose their own perceptions upon womanhood.

Televisions prefer to perpetuate a stereotype instead of doing a normal research and being objective; when they perpetuate the stereotype, this unfortunately makes children adopt prejudices such as: “Arabs are very wealthy and have oil; all Arabs are named Mohammed, Ahmed or Abdul.” For instance, we can consider relevant the television cartoons which are popular among children, such as *Scooby-Doo*, *Porky Pig*, *Popeye* or *Woody Woodpecker*. In *Scooby-Doo*, they present uncle Abdullah and his genie; in *Porky Pig*, Ali-Baba dumps a bad-hearted Arab into a barrel of syrup. Bugs Bunny “escapes from being boiled in oil by satisfying the whims of a sheik with an unnamed goat.” (Shaheen, 1984) According to professor Jack Shaheen (1984), these cartoons define the world in very narrow terms, i.e. good vs. evil.

What it is actually terrible is that TV programmes and newspapers ignore the fact that the Islamic religion preaches kindness and peace. The distortion of Islamic religion makes the audience believe that it is a gloomy religion leading to acts of terrorism and fanaticism. This point of view is also maintained by the film industry which presents Arabs, Iranians and Pakistanis as violent and religious fanatics. Mass-media portrays Muslims as being evil and corrupt people, dark-skinned men, with unkempt moustaches or beards, wild eyes and looks, wearing guns, turbans and robes, often sentencing their wives and daughters to death by stoning. Their women are seen as submissive and even oppressed, being forced to wear hijab and burka to cover their face, hair, arms and the rest of the body. They walk several paces behind abusive wealthy men, their heads lowered, keeping silence, uneducated and unattractive human beings. Besides, the diverse and colourful Islamic world is populated with bearded mullahs, wealthy sheikhs, palaces, prayers, awful punishments, bombers, curved daggers, bedouins, deserts, goats, camels, tents, palm trees, belly dancers, harem girls. Thus, people unfortunately forget about their millenary history and their fascinating and rich culture.

Whereas newspapers and televisions play the main role in the way we perceive individuals, it is sometimes the characterization of these individuals in movies and books that shape our stereotypes. A good example is the novel "*The Bookseller of Kabul*" written by the Norwegian journalist Asne Seierstad after living for five months in Afghanistan, in the house of a bookseller and his large family. The author describes the Muslim family (actually a typical one), starting with their everyday activities, the relations between family members, their mentality, at the same time analyzing the most important aspects of the life in Afghanistan and Pakistan: laws, social rules, customs, habits, education, the relations between men and women. The journalist approaches many sensitive issues of the Muslim world, portraying it like an environment full of prejudices, injustice (especially for women), poverty, hypocrisy, absurd rules and laws. The women in the family, especially the young ones, were treated like servants, having to do everything to please their mother and the men in the family and being allowed to do nothing for themselves. Even if the main character, the bookseller, was quite rich and appreciated books very much (considering himself an important man who brought his contribution to improving the level of culture of the people in Afghanistan and Pakistan), he did not allow his sisters to continue their education or find a job. Even his very young brothers imposed themselves on their mother and sisters. Asne Seierstad also mentioned a very tragic happening: the disappearance of a young woman in the neighbourhood who was said to have been killed by her mother's order for not observing a certain Islamic rule.

On the 30th of July 2010, *The Guardian* wrote about the author of this novel which enjoyed a huge popularity: "The news that Åsne Seierstad, Norwegian author of "*The Bookseller of Kabul*", has been successfully sued by one of her book's characters will be greeted as either a blow to artistic freedom of expression or a victory for the world's misrepresented and powerless poor. Seierstad was ordered to pay more than £26,000 in punitive damages to Suraia Rais, the second wife of Shah Muhammad Rais, with whose family she lived in Afghanistan for five months in 2002. Other family members have also announced that they will sue and the author and her publisher also face substantial legal costs. They have vowed to appeal the case all the way to the European court of human rights arguing that it sets a dangerous legal precedent." (*The Guardian*, 30th July 2010)

Certainly, the members of the Muslim family must have felt betrayed by the European woman they had accommodated for quite a long time and that is why they sued her. All the details she gave about their family life and about each and every person in the family must have offended them, being rightfully considered an attack on privacy. Last but not least, it may have been considered an attack on the Muslims' image generally speaking, i.e. family relations, the relations between men and women,

social rules, laws, ideology, education, business. I must confess that, although I liked the novel very much (especially due to my fascination for The Middle East), from the imagological point of view I read it in terms of rejection, meaning that some Muslim issues described by the writer made me feel displeasure, sadness, indignation, even fury and disgust.

As it has been seen, the continued existence of a stereotype diminishes individuals' value and character. It is our responsibility as human beings and citizens of the world to assure that we are perceived fairly, that all of us are judged objectively and that we will always be fair with the foreign "Other", no matter how different it is from us.

As this paper began with the wise and touching words of a Muslim scholar and poet, we should end it in the same key, with a poem belonging to Rudyard Kipling – the writer who was awarded the Noble Prize in Literature in 1907:

*"All good people agree
And all good people say,
All nice people, like Us are We
And every one else is They:
But if you cross over the sea,
Instead of over the way,
You may end up (think of it) looking at We
As a sort of They!"* (R. Kipling, "We and They")

It is indeed true that, from an imagological point of view, distance (either physical or mental and psychological) creates distortions, prejudices and stereotypes. It is probably much easier (and more superficial, of course) to think and feel in terms of "they" instead of assuming the familiar and comprehensive "we".

To conclude, we should always remember that none of us is above and none of us below, that we should stand up for each other for a better world, as all of us are the children of the same planet.

References

- Gavriliu, Eugenia (2002). *Theory and Practice of Imagology: Experiencing the Other in Anglo-Romanian Cultural Encounters*. Galati: Editura Fundației Universitare "Dunărea de Jos".
- Ghareeb, E. (1983). *Split Vision: The Portrayal of Arabs in the American Media*. Washington, D.C.: American-Arab Affairs Council.
- Shaheen, Jack (1997). *Arab and Muslim Stereotyping in American Popular Culture*. Gergeton University.
- Shaheen, J. (1984). *The TV Arab*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University, Popular Press.
- Sydney, Harris (1986). *The World Shrinks and Stereo-types Fall*. Detroit Free Press, April 11th.

Online Sources

- Effects of Arab American Discrimination Post 9/11 in the Contexts of...
commons.emich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1037&context...
- Bookseller of Kabul author Åsne Seierstad: 'It's not... - The Guardian.
www.theguardian.com > Culture > Books > Åsne Seierstad.